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Representation of Culture, Nature and Women in Contemporary Select Tribal Indian English Fictions: An Eco-feminist Study

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Abstract

This paper examines the socio-cultural, political, and ecological dimensions of tribal life through the literary works of Gopinath Mohanty, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, and Temsula Ao. Focusing on the Paraja, Santhal, and Naga communities, the study explores indigenous traditions, identity, gender relations, folklore, and environmental consciousness. Employing the theoretical frameworks of Cultural Studies and Ecofeminism, it analyses Paraja, The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey, and Laburnum for My Head to understand the interconnectedness of nature, women, and tribal society. The paper highlights the challenges faced by tribal communities while emphasizing the preservation of their cultural heritage and ecological worldview today.

Keywords: *Tribal Identity, Ecofeminism, Cultural Studies, Indigenous Communities, Adivasi Literature, Environmental Consciousness.*

Introduction

The present research article is based on social, political, and cultural perspectives, attached to tradition and emotion. The research will focus on the Paraja, Santhal, and Naga tribes, and the study area will be explored through the literary works of Gopinath Mohanty, Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar, and Temsula Ao. The native tribal communities of Koraput, East Shinghbhum, and Nagaland are known as Paraja, Santhal, and Naga. The depiction of a realistic picture of these tribes by Mohanty, Hansda and Ao is the treasure house of Indian literature.

The East and North-Eastern states of India are blessed by Mother Nature with abundant cultural, traditional, and human resources of unblemished beauty. The tribes live on this beautiful land, known for its myths, cultural traditions, folklore, and natural beauty, which find expression in many forms of literature. The literary works of these three writers serve as a record of the aboriginals' social, historical, and cultural life. Now it is time to revisit the literature about the native to explore their culture and socio-political conditions. Mark Twain, in his famous travelogue *Following the Equator* (1897), remarked that "India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of Human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great-grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only" (Twain, 1897, p. 17). The quote makes us proud of our rich Indian tribal culture. While the culture of aboriginals is lost among the piles of cosmopolitanism in the modern world, the literature of Gopinath Mohanty, Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar and Tuemsula Ao tries to find its way in between their language, to be seen, to be heard, to be identified!

So the current research paper will give a new dimension to the writings of aborigines. Indian Adivasi people are still unexplained in the writing world. Their experiences are still unheard. Now it is time to provide a platform to them. Their struggle with internal and external forces is unpredictable. The forest dwellers and

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those who settled in the thanda, hatti are living an uncertain life. Basic services like roads, electricity, and health are not reached; no bus facilities, and no proper roads are made to these backward and remote villages where people from the world participated and discussed on certain important issues of Adivasis. As the word itself indicates, Adivasis are the natives of this nation. Who are living away from the main land so-called civilised mainland world? Some tribals are submerged in the civilised world, and receive education and build houses in the extension areas of the metropolitan cities. Whereas some on evidence is Handijogi, though they scattered all over India still involved in small business-like street vending, that to be items like plastic bowls, broomsticks, which are out dated purchasing hairs, the world is crossed all these things, whenever they go to the city plastic mall are selling cheaper items why should they go for the one which is sold for the profit. Hence, their vending business is an utter flop. What is the solution? Unless the civilised world understands the anguish of these people, they may not prosper. This research proposal will explore the rich, unheard culture of Adivasi people, their rituals, beliefs and faith system in the light of Cultural Studies.

Primary Material

The genre of Aboriginal studies gives a new horizon to literature and literary studies. The study of culture is a modern trend, and the research proposal will also help us understand the condition of tribal people by examining their social, political, economic, and historical contexts. This research proposal will also be grounded on the theoretical concept of 'Ecofeminism'. The French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne, in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), coined the term Ecofeminism. This study explores the connections between women and nature in culture, economy, religion, politics, literature and iconography. It also addresses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women. The proposal proposes to understand the nature, culture and women through the following works of Gopinath Mothanty's *Paraja* (1987), Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014) and Temsüla Ao's *Laburnum For My Head* (2009).

The novel *Paraja*, written originally in Odia in 1945 and translated here for the first time, *i*s a classic of modern Indian fiction. It tells on an epic scale the story of a tribal patriarch and their family in the mountainous jungles of Odisha. The slow decline in the fortunes of this family, from the quiet prosperity of a subsistence livelihood towards bondage to the local money lender, is both poignantly individualised as well as symbolic of the erosion of a whole way of life within peasant communities. The novel, furthermore, transcends what it documents because its characters are not merely primitive tribesmen ensnared by a predatory moneylender. Mohanty's protagonists are also quintessentially men and women waging heroic but futile war against a hostile universe. As the citation of the Jnanpith Award of 1974 put it - 'in Mohanty's hands the social is lifted to the level of the metaphysical.'

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey***,** where Rupi gives birth to her eldest son squatting in the middle of a paddy field, shin-deep in mud and slush. Soon after, Gurubari, her rival in love, gave her an illness that was like the alakjari vine, which engulfs the tallest, greenest trees of the forest and sucks their hearts out. Now Rupi, once the strongest woman in her village, lives out her days on a cot in the backyard, and her life dissolves into incomprehensible ruin around her. *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* is the story of the Baskeys—the patriarch Somai; his alcoholic, irrepressible daughter Putki; Khorda, Putki's devout, upright husband, and their sons Sido and Doso; and Sido's wife Rupi. Equally, the novel is about Kadamdihi, the Santhal village in Jharkhand, in which the Baskeys live. For it is in full view of the village that the various large and small dramas of the Baskeys's lives play out, even as the village cheers them on, finds fault with them, prays for them and, most of all, enjoys the spectacle they provide. An astonishingly assured and original debut, The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey brings to vivid life a village, its people, and the gods-good and bad-who influence them. Through their intersecting lives, it explores the age-old notions of good and evil and the murky ways in which the heart and the mind work.

In Ao's *Laburnum For My Head,* we see that every May, something extraordinary happens in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town laburnum tree, with buttery yellow blossoms, flowers over the spot where

Lentina is buried. A brave hunter, Imchanok, totters when the ghost of his prey haunts him, till he offers it a tuft of his hair as a prayer for forgiveness. Pokenmong, the servant boy, by dint of his wit, sells an airfield to unsuspecting villagers. A letter found on a dead insurgent blurs the boundaries between him and an innocent villager, both struggling to make ends meet. A woman's terrible secret comes full circle, changing her daughter's and granddaughter's lives as well as her own. An illiterate village woman's simple question rattles an army officer and forces him to set her husband free. A young girl loses her lover in his fight for the motherland, leaving her a frightful legacy. And a caterpillar finds wings. From the mythical to the modern, *Laburnum for My Head* is a collection of short stories that embrace a gamut of emotions. Heartrending, witty and riddled with irony, the stories depict a deep understanding of the human condition.

Literature Review

This research paper is about tribal traditional identities and historically transformed images, rituals, customs, and social structures of their own common but diversified culture. A thematic approach from the tribal identity concerns perspective has been adopted for this research paper. So culture is a set of practices, as in human practices done over a period of time with specific meaning, symbolic significance for its practitioners and for others. This is the sense in which we will be using it in cultural studies. (P.K. Nayar, 2008). As the tribal society is isolated from the mainstream society, so their culture, customs, rituals and traditions are in heritage from the earlier generations and move to the next generation. The novel Paraja by Gopinath Mohanty is also the record of a social man against the dark forces of social oppression and destiny. Sitakanta Mohapatra, in his widely cited article *Towards Passion and Clarity*, talks about Mohanty, "Oriya literature have been intensely human, non-ideological, deeply concerned with human destiny, and as much universal and timeless as local in its cultural ethos and contemporary. They have sought to speak in a relatively quieter voice and with an air of tentativeness ….The new voices have sought to go back to the roots, to test the sense of our identity, our belongingness, with that ancient question of Plotinus: "Who are we?" (Mahapatra, 1979, p. 6). Paraja boys and girls danced….During the dance at night the seven Domb girls, their hands around each-others‟ waist waving a piece of cloth, jumping and shouting, would pass through the line of Paraja girls and surround Paraja boys and dance. The night grew darker as they drank and danced…. And of course varieties of sarees, coloured blouses parrot prints, star prints, tiger prints. The air over there would be heavy with the smell of scented oil in the hair. And barrel after barrel wine (Das, 1987, p. 19). Overall, this provides valuable insight into the central issue of culture, treatment of women and traditional history. The primitive jungle life of Praja was encountered with devastating obstructions, which were man-ordained, not God nor Nature-ordained. Though we see the Paraja as a patriarchal society but they have no culture to sell a daughter to the flesh trade. But the suffering is common for girls and women in the Paraja community, as Mohanty himself says, "She(Jili) felt herself growing old without having received anything from life. "Land alienation, lack of opportunities for education and almost any form of development, misappropriation of wages and the products of labour, sexual abuse and lack of political representation, all these are hallmarks of marginalized tribal community" (Das, 1987, 2). It highlights the ongoing struggles of marginalised communities and the importance of recognising their rights and dignity.

"Nature is superior to everything that exists on earth. Nature is the root of all civilisations and also a significant part of every process of life. Tribal people are considered to be the first settlements of any civilisation… Tribes are indigenous communities that coexist with nature, causing little to no harm" (Joseph, 2022). This article explores the study of literature and the environment. It examines how environmental concerns, environmental culture issues, and perspectives towards nature are expressed and examined. The study of how people in society act and respond regarding nature and environmental circumstances is one of the fundamental aims of ecocriticism. The present paper will analyse the contemporary Indian novel on tribes in Green (cultural) studies, which is a subgenre of Eco criticism. Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, coined the term "Deep Ecology," which highlights the fundamental interdependence of all living forms and environmental characteristics, and provides a symbiotic and holistic rather than anthropocentric worldview.

Panchali Bhattacharya, in *Indigeneity, Femininity, and the Practice of Occult in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey.* Makes it clear that the novelist makes a bold attempt to showcase the alleged practice of dahni-bidya by Santhal women and its acceptance by the tribal society. Shekhar deviates considerably from the traditional matrix of stereotypical presentation of women in indigenous literary creations. Instead of socially ostracising women who cast evil eyes on others, Shekhar undertakes an attitude that neither glorifies nor condemns the social system in which women are either the perpetrators or the victims of witchcraft; rather, he depicts the supernatural beliefs and rituals of his ethnic group to a wider Indian and global audience in a matter-of-fact manner.

"In India, tribal theology seems to include the presence of spirits….. There is always a nature-human beings-spirit continuum in the tribal vision of life."- Asis De in his article *Natural Supernaturalism and Tribal Ecotheology in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey'.* It broadly discusses about Eco-theology, is a field of knowledge that involves our understanding of ecology within one/multiple theological context/s and necessarily addresses the relationship between God/ the Divine, human beings and the non-human creations on earth (Dell 56-69). The major Indian tribal community, the Santhal, has deep supernatural beliefs as they live in the lap of nature, become part of it and promote eco-theological practices which substantially contribute to the belief that behind every 'natural' event, there should be supernatural workings.

When we study on tribal life and literature, we always find their story that has rich descriptions of or about culture, women and nature. The article 'Women, Nature and Biophilia: The Making of Nature-based Identity in Temsula Ao's 'Laburnum for My Head" by Sk Tarik Al has much discussion about power politics. One of the distinctive ways of self-assertion and identity formation for women is their affinity toward and association with nature and its non-human organisms. 'The socio-patriarchal norms and the systematic structuration and imposition of gender roles have turned the women into subaltern subjects striving towards voicing their subaltern consciousness.' The statement shows that women become subordinate in Naga society. Unlike these scholars, however, my focus will remain not only on its socio-political condition of women but on the gender issues and, at the same time, environmental issues. This will be examined through the paradigm of Eco-feminism. The concept of cultural study can also be employed to make it more relevant in the present context.

Conclusion

An Ecocritical study- the world of tribal people has a direct connection with the Green World. In the modern 21st century, the gap between humans and nature is increasing, making the study of tribal literature an immense space for connecting literature and Ecology. The indigenous people live in harmony with nature, so they have a deep connection with it. Jili, Bili and Rupi have been oppressed and exploited by the hands of patriarchal society. The theory will speak in favour of women, in favour of the environment and in favour of the entire marginalised group. The select works of Gopinath Mohanty, Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar and Tuemsula Ao are the true documents on Paraja, Santhal and Naga tribes. The primary texts analysed in the light of the theory 'Cultural Studies' in connection with folk culture.On the other hand, the presentation of Nature and Women in those three masterpieces. Gopinath Mothanty's Paraja, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey and Temsüla Ao's Laburnum For My Head give a huge scope to explore the condition of women in tribal society and the relationship between human beings and nature. Nature has the physical power causing all the phenomena of the material world. So green theorists are interested in phenomena such as plants, animals and landscape, and present research can help us to understand nature through tribal life.

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